

AN IGNOMINIOUS DEFEAT? – THE ROLE OF THE HUNGARIAN CAVALRY DURING THE FIRST MONTHS OF WWI

DAVID ADAM LIGETI

In this paper I would like to summarize the main events of the Hungarian cavalry during the first months of WWI. When I use the term “Hungarian”, I shall use it in the wider sense, not in the “Magyar” comprehension. Although the rate of nationalities was lower in the Hungarian cavalry, many non-Magyar soldiers were recruited. For example, the 5th Honvéd Hussar Regiment, whose headquarters was based in Kassa (Košice) in peacetime, included many Slovaks as well. For example, there were many soldiers named Bednarik/Bernolak, which is a common Slovak surname.¹

Before we delve into on our main topic it is worth summarizing the most important peacetime data. The Hungarian cavalry had 16 Hussar k. u. k. and 10 Honvéd-Hussar regiments and 2 k. u. k. Ulan regiments. In addition to these forces, the entire empire had 15 dragoons and 15 Ulan regiments, so the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy had 58 cavalry regiments, which contained 353 squadrons.² Consequently, the 28 Hungarian regiments compromised 48% of the cavalry in the field, which exceeded the normal recruiting quota of the Kingdom of Hungary. This branch had an elite self-awareness: according to the glorious past the nobility represented itself notably. The cavalry of the Monarchy was stationed mainly in Galicia, because the huge plains built up an ideal battlefield for the fast-moving units, while the rough terrain of the southern border provided little opportunity for a successful utilization of horsemen.

In the Monarchy, in the early 20th century, there were two schools of thought on the use of the cavalry in times of war. The traditional school held that bravery and strong discipline would offset any technical advantage the enemy may enjoy, so it would be possible to lead both frontal assaults and charges. According to this school, whose leader was General Tersztyánszky, the cavalymen would have to fight on horseback, and so it would be unnecessary to use infantry-practice and methods.³ The regulations of the Honvéd-cavalry stated, that “*on horseback the cavalry knows only one warfare: attack! With a surprising and fierce attack it is possible to defeat the stronger enemy, too.*”⁴ According to these doctrines the cavalry had to exploit its speed, which meant that fighting as infantry should have been avoided in most cases. Although the new experiences of the role of the cavalry were known to the military leaders of the Monarchy (e. g. the Second Boer War and the Russian-Japanese War), this information was swept from the desk.

¹ Ferenc JULIER, *Limanowa*. M. Kir. Hadilevéltár, Budapest 1937, pp. 6–10.

² Ferenc POLLMANN, *A Monarchia lovassága az első világháborúban*. In: Huszárok a történelem forgószínpadán. Tudományos konferencia: Sárvár 2000, szeptember 14–15, p. 137.

³ Ferenc POLLMANN: *Balszerencse, semmi más? Tersztyánszky Károly cs. és kir. vezérezredes élete és pályafutása*. Balassi, Budapest 2003, p. 33.

⁴ Gyakorlati szabályzat a honvédlövasság részére. II. Rész. Budapest 1914, pp. 137–138.

The other school believed that the golden age of cavalry had already ended in the Franco-Prussian war in 1870. The theorists of this school (led by General Edelsheim-Gyulai) thought that cavalymen would fight mostly shoulder to shoulder with the infantry, and that it would be necessary to equip mounted units with machine guns and grenades.⁵ Unfortunately this school was in the minority, as Franz Joseph and Archduke Franz Ferdinand preferred the doctrines of Tersztyánszky.

The debates about the future of the cavalry were conducted in the official review of *Kavalleristische Monatshefte*. On these pages the devotees of swords and carbines had a continuous, but ultimately deadlocked dispute about the future of the cavalry. Unfortunately the conservative camp grew more confident after the First Balkan War, namely the battle of Lüle-Burgasz, where the Turkish cavalry broke through a massive defense-line, which was protected by the Bulgarian infantry.⁶ This enthusiasm was held by other nations, too: the English, French and Russian High Commands decided to reintroduce lancers.

After the Austro-Hungarian declaration of war on Russia on the 6th of August 1914, the Austrian chief of staff, General Conrad von Hötzendorf, gave important orders to the cavalry of the Monarchy, also on that day.⁷ According to the doctrines of the previous century the cavalry had to spot the strengths of the enemy forces and raid the hostile wings on the Eastern Front. Therefore Conrad had a plan to observe (“reconnoitre”) the enemy along the long border with Russia with ten cavalry divisions. The cavalry had the task of securing the transportation hubs and railway conjunctions as well. The Austro-Hungarian High Command (AOK) feared the possibility that the superior Russian cavalry would invade these important stations and so hinder the deployment of Monarchist troops.⁸

Due to their speediness and manoeuvrability the cavalries were the first to clash. These first battles – similar to those on the Western Front – were fought only with cavalry, and these early engagements were reminiscent of the Napoleonic Wars: swords, lances and pikes were often used. The first battles on the Eastern Front involved mostly the cavalry only, and the rate of casualties was acceptable for the chiefs of staff on both sides, Russia and the Monarchy.⁹

But on the 15th of August with the arrival of infantry units on both sides, the whole picture changed. When machine guns and artillery appeared, the proud and self-confident cavalry was doomed to failure on the battlefield.

In spite of the conservative attitude of the military leadership, some modernisation was introduced by the High Command. In 1908 machine guns were introduced for the cavalry-regiments and new horsed artillery units were composed as well.¹⁰ However the coloured uniforms stayed in use, and much important equipment was not introduced to the cavalymen.

This fatal error led to a whole series of catastrophes and dances of death on the Eastern Front in the first days of the war. Due to the frontal assaults and attempts at charging by the cavalry, the Hungarian cavalry suffered deadly and brutal losses. The Russian Maxim machine guns and modern howitzers decimated the strength of the cavalry units. These first

⁵ F. POLLMANN, *Balszerencse, semmi más*, p. 33.

⁶ Tibor BALLA, *A magyar királyi honvéd lovasság, 1868–1914*. Balassi, Budapest 2000, p. 129.

⁷ Lawrence SONDHAUS, *Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf. Architekt der Apokalypse*. Neuer Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, Wien – Graz, 2003, p. 163.

⁸ *Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg. Erster Band*, p. 155.

⁹ Norman STONE, *The Eastern Front 1914–1917*. Hodder and Stoughton, London 1975, p. 80.

¹⁰ F. POLLMANN, *Balszerencse, semmi más*, p. 36.

infamous *débâcles* played an important part in Hungarian military history. From these many battles, I would like to discuss two in greater detail.

At Assumption, also on the 15th of August, at Stójanów the 24th Honvéd Cavalry-Brigade led a successful charge against the Russians.¹¹ The Hussars not only reached the enemy lines, but broke through. Unfortunately a wrong signal for withdrawal stopped the advance of the Hussars, and the astonished Russians were able to pull back from the attack. Despite their approx. 40 % losses, this battle earned for the Hungarian cavalry its reputation among the Russians.

The most remembered massacre was the battle of Gorodok-Satanów. On the 17th of August the Hungarian Hussars led an audacious charge against the Russians. The result was an inevitable massacre, the battlefield transformed rapidly to a shambles. Without even arriving to the enemy lines, the Hungarian cavalry suffered enormous casualties. The commanding General-Lieutenant Froreich took responsibility for the consequences of the catastrophe and committed suicide. The bloody casualty rate was over 50 %, so the officers and non-commissioned officers of the *belle époque* were either dead, captured or severely wounded. In this fatal engagement the loss of horses was even more horrendous, with over 70 % destroyed. The reason why was that the horses had been easier targets because of their larger physical size. This battle was an ominous and tremendous reminder of the infamous charge of the British Light Cavalry on the 25th of October 1854. The battle of Gorodok-Satanów shadowed the reputation of the Hungarian Hussars and had a tremendous shock on Hungarian public opinion, too.

The débâcle of Gorodok was only an overture for other such massacres. The heaviest fighting took place at Jaroslawice on the 20th of August, where mostly Austrian dragoons and ulans were involved, but the result was shocking.¹² After the first, horrific experiences of battle, frontal assaults were forbidden for the cavalry, but reconnaissance and outflanking manoeuvres were still allowed. The Hungarians fought with audacity, but their effectiveness was limited by their obsolete equipment and uniforms: their fine and decorative uniforms had made them a motley dartboard for the enemy gunners. Moreover their lack of bayonets had had a deadly aftermath on the battlefield, where the cavalry had an important role as mounted infantry. Allow me a quick explanation of mounted infantry: It refers to those troops who were transported from battle to battle on horseback. Once having arrived at the battlefield they would dismount and fight as infantry. This battle proved that the doctrines of Tersztyánszky were badly obsolete, and that frontal assaults with the cavalry would only lead to further catastrophe. But we may ascertain that not only the Austro-Hungarian doctrines, but all European methods for using cavalry were out-of-date. The Russians had the most experience because of the bloody and merciless battles of Manchuria in 1904–1905, but, due to the rough terrain of the Chinese province, cavalry played only a supporting role.

Beginning with the infamous defeat at Gorodok, the Hungarian cavalry played an important part in the first battles of WWI. The Kingdom of Hungary provided all of the Hussar regiments of Austria-Hungary within the k. u. k. and Honvéd units. Although only obsolete equipment was at their disposal, Hungarian cavalry played an important role in reconnaissance and in the raiding of enemy lines as well. In the following few weeks the Hungarian

¹¹ F. POLLMANN, *A Monarchia lovassága*, p. 143.

¹² „In this first period, the major activity was an Austro-Hungarian cavalry raid – ten divisions, drawn up in a semi-circle, old fashioned sort: the largest of them on 20th August at Jaroslawice, where two cavalry divisions wheeled around and sabred each other, the commanders having tacitly agreed to behave as if the twentieth century had not happened.” N. STONE, *The Eastern Front*, p. 80.

cavalry suffered enormous casualties, but their importance was invaluable in cases of attacking, in covering retreats etc. Honouring the audacity of the Hungarian cavalry, the Hussars were called the “Red Devils” by the Russian army.¹³ The Hussars had an important role at the victorious battles of Kraśnik and Komarów.

At the latter, the 29th Honvéd Brigade, which consisted of Hungarian Hussars, had an important and eminent role in the victory. At the right flank of the 4th Army, the k. u. k. 15th Division was in dire straits after a night-time bloodbath. They had taken over 50 % casualties, and shocked by this enormous loss, had retreated back rapidly. In this critical situation, the former leader of the Military Office of Franz Ferdinand, Colonel Bardolff, gathered some Hussars from the retreating infantry and ordered a counterattack.¹⁴ The Russians were astonished and withdrew immediately. Without this bold assistance by the cavalry the fate of this division would have been sealed.

Despite the obsolete and senseless regulations of the Monarchy, the Austrian commanders recognized that modern warfare required a new method of using the cavalry; therefore the Hussars were often ordered to fight as infantry. The mounted charges were abandoned, but the equipment did not follow the infantryman fights of Hussars. They lacked bayonets, diggers and new khaki-coloured uniforms. This phenomenon manifested itself in the case of the battle of Limanowa, where the Hungarian cavalry stopped the counterattack of the tsarist army. In addition to enemy bullets, the loss of horses was traced back to the use of unaccommodating saddles, which broke the horses’ backs, and senselessly wounded them. During peacetime, the saddles fit the horses snugly, but as the war dragged on, as feed became scarcer and scarcer and the horses suffered malnutrition, which led to drastic weight loss, the loose saddles rubbing along their bony backs proved to be torturous and lethal. According to official figures, 80% of the loss in horses derived from these saddle circumstances.¹⁵

As is well known, at the battle of Limanowa-Lapanów, the Monarchy stopped the Russians advancing on Kraków and the Silesian industrial area. The key to this victory was a successful counterattack on the 8th of December, led by General-Lieutenant Arz.¹⁶ On the right flank, Arz had a powerful elite group, the so-called Herbenstein-group, which consisted of four Hussar regiments. These units were experienced, bold and eager to fight. Although Arz had a veteran German infantry unit as well, most of them were Landsturm soldiers, and their fight-value was low. After five days, the front ground to a halt and a horrendous hand-to-hand battle began. A bitter fight culminated at the Golców heights, and the Hussars were able to prevent enemy attempts at outflanking the units of the Monarchy. Limanowa presented a rapid victory for the Dualist State, but the cost was high: app. 70 % of the Hussars involved in the fighting were dead, captured or wounded. The commander of the 9th Hussar Regiment (based in Sopron), Colonel Otmár Muhr was dead after he had commanded a successful but bloody counterattack. His last words: “*Forward boys! Long live the King!*” were manifested as a fighting slogan in Hungary.¹⁷ The battle of Limanowa was legendized in Hungary, which was strengthened by the fact, that Hussars had been involved.

¹³ István KOSZTA, *Huszártörténet*. Pro-Print Kiadó, Csíkszereda 2008, p. 104.

¹⁴ Arthur ARZ, *Zur Geschichte des Grossen Krieges. Aufzeichnungen von Generaloberst Arz*. Rikola Verlag, Wien – Leipzig – München 1924, p. 23.

¹⁵ F. POLLMANN, *A Monarchia lovassága*, p. 144.

¹⁶ A. ARZ, *Zur Geschichte des Grossen Krieges*, pp. 44–45.

¹⁷ F. JULIER, *Limanowa*, p. 203.

A high price was paid because of the errors and misuse of cavalry: the main part, and particularly the officer-corps of the Hungarian cavalry, was lost. Contrary to these shocks the Hungarian cavalry played an important part on the Eastern Front, especially in 1915, after the breakthrough at Gorlice. In defence they were used mostly as reserve forces, and so were used in covering retreats many times. Unfortunately the Austro-Hungarian High Command had drawn the wrong conclusions from the earlier defeats, and the losses were only partially replaced. The war proved later that the cavalry would have an important role in prosecuting and encircling the withdrawing enemy after the successful battle at Caporetto in 1917, especially due to the tremendous fact that the Central Powers lacked tanks, and so the exploits of breakthrough badly needed fast-moving units.

But at this time, the former proud and crafty units of Hussar regiments were used as specialized infantry, and so had little effect on the events on the Italian battlefields.

Summarizing, the Hungarian cavalry suffered enormous losses, but had glorious victories and well-fought draws as well. Therefore the cavalry was not obsolete in the proper sense of the word, and Hussar regiments fought in WWII as well. For example, they had a successful charge in 1941 on the Eastern Front.